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## Silence (and its voluble partner)

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# Edith Cowan University

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EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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• INAUGURAL PROFESSORIAL LECTURE •

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**Silence**  
**(And Its Voluble Partner)**

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**Professor Andrew Taylor**

**Professor of English**

**Edith Cowan University**

**10 November 1992**

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# **Silence**

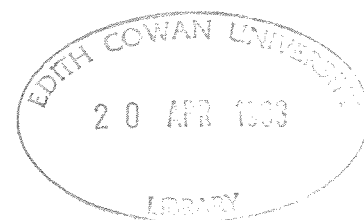
## **(And Its Voluble Partner)**

Professor Andrew Taylor

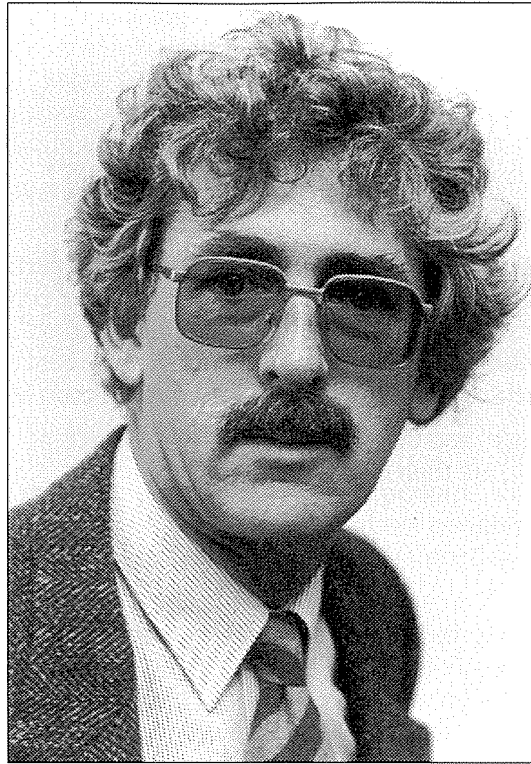
An Inaugural Professorial Lecture

Presented to Edith Cowan University

on 10 November 1992



Perth  
Edith Cowan University  
1993



**Professor Andrew Taylor, AM**

Professor Andrew Taylor is Professor of English in the Faculty of Arts at Edith Cowan University and was formerly Associate Professor of English at the University of Adelaide. In 1991 he was Visiting Professor, University of Tübingen, Germany.

He was awarded a Bachelor of Arts with First Class Honours and a Master of Arts with First Class Honours from The University of Melbourne where he later became Lockie Fellow in Creative Writing and Australian Literature. In 1970-1971 he held an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship at the University of New York at Buffalo.

Andrew Taylor is a well known author. He has published ten books of poetry, a book of literary criticism and one book for children, is co-author of two further literary works, and author of two opera libretti which have been set to music. Professor Taylor is the editor of five books of essays, poetry and fiction. One of his volumes of poetry, *Travelling*, was the Pacific Region Winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1986.

He has been a member of the Australia Council and served as a member and acting chairman of the Literature Board of the Australia Council. He has participated actively in the Australian Society of Authors. He was the co-founder of Adelaide's Friendly Street Poetry Readings and initiator of the South Australian Writers' Centre. In 1990 Andrew Taylor was made a Member of the Order of Australia "for service to the arts, particularly in the field of literature".

# **Abstract**

## **Silence (And Its Voluble Partner)**

Silence may traditionally have been golden, but how is it valued today? Can it survive the impact of a technology which can, and does, bring the apparently irresistible seductions of noise to the remotest parts of the world, and which invades the most reclusive aspects of our lives? And what place has silence in a culture such as ours which classifies it as “unproductive”?

But what is silence anyway?

Professor Taylor considers two ways in which, from the Romantic period onward, silence has been conceived. One tradition equates silence with Truth itself; the other considers it the condition which enables Truth to become manifest. In contrast, today's technology brings about a devaluation of silence by making it easy to avoid. This has profound consequences for the conception of Thought which, until recently, has been characteristic of the Western intellectual tradition.

The consequences of this change, and their implications for the teaching and study of literature and for university education in general, are then considered.

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats once remarked to the effect that in times of emotional stress and upheaval the natural tendency of people is not to achieve a burst of eloquence, but to fall silent. If this should be the case even for that most eloquent of people, the Irish, how much more so, on this occasion, for myself, an Australian of almost pure Scottish ancestry. Neither Scots nor Australians, after all, are noted for their ready flow of words, even at the most propitious of times.

Yeats also started one of his most moving late poems with the lines: "I sought a theme and sought for it in vain, / I sought it daily for six weeks or so" ("The Circus Animals' Desertion"). That certainly seemed to apply to my case too, but not the rest of the poem, I hope, which continues: "Maybe at last, being but a broken man, / I must be satisfied with my heart" and concludes: "Now that my ladder's gone, / I must lie down where all the ladders start, / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart". It seemed inadvisable to pursue the appropriateness of this poem to my situation beyond the first two lines, in case Edith Cowan University began to have second thoughts about employing me. Besides, Yeats wrote these lines in the last year of his life, when he was seventy-three and in his full powers. I have still some time to go before retiring, and hope to reach my full powers before I do so.

Nonetheless, on such a formal occasion as an Inaugural Lecture, it is much more pleasant being a member of the silent majority, the audience, than it is to be up here. And it is by no means easy to find an appropriate theme. So I was quite pleased when it occurred to me that, as I am a Professor of English, silence would be not only oddly suitable but even, perhaps, unexpected. However, I was a little less pleased when it was pointed out to me that I could not possibly stand, John Cage-like, silent in front of you for fifty minutes, but would actually have to say something about silence. So that is what I intend to do now.

But, of course, the very act of talking about silence reveals both silence's inadequacy and its strange complicity with language. Silence, as the saying goes, is golden. I interpret this aphorism as indicative that silence, as a paradoxical "speech act" (Searle, 1969) endowed with value, does not adequately speak for itself. Silence, if it is to proclaim its value, has to be represented by us. One might say that this golden eloquence of silence has to be translated or interpreted: strangely, it does not speak our tongue. Like an infant or a foreigner, its very muteness has to be spoken, has to be transgressed, in order to become apparent. And it is in that moment of transgression, when speech utters what silence cannot, when silence passes over, you might say, into speech and realises itself in the act of becoming what it is not, that the potency of silence is manifest. The potency of silence, it is revealed, is to enable speech and language in general—what I have called its voluble partner.

For several years after I left school I was haunted by a poem which I had come across in that famous school text, James Reeves' *The Poet's World*. The poem goes (in part) like this:

Only a man harrowing clods  
In a slow silent walk  
With an old horse that stumbles and nods  
Half asleep as they stalk.  
Only thin smoke without flame  
From the heaps of couch-grass;  
Yet these will go onward the same  
Though dynasties pass.

(1-8)

These are, of course, the first two stanzas of Thomas Hardy's "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'" written in 1915 (the date is important). Hardy was wrong about the horse, which has been replaced in most parts of the world today by a tractor, with the accompanying noise that a tractor makes. Yet Hardy's poem, with its unobtrusive but unmistakable stress on the significance of silence or, in the last stanza, "whispering" (that is, a speech intimately complicit with silence), seemed to me for many years to exemplify a truth that it thematises: that the endurance of humanity is to be found in the small, the unobtrusive, the homely and the silent, rather than in the noise and rhetoric of "Dynasties". Dynasties may—indeed will—pass, but these small and silent acts "will go onward the same". Today, however, I am not so sure.

It would be a fascinating project to do for silence what silence cannot do for itself, that is, to write its history. Clearly that is beyond the scope of this lecture, and the difficulties of such a project have been formulated by Jacques Derrida (1978) in his essay "Cogito and the History of Madness". But if we go



back even only so far as the Romantic period, to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, one can see silence emerge from the relative obscurity with which it endured the previous century in order to occupy a position of honour on the Romantic stage, a stage which it shared with such other Romantic inventions as the Imagination, the Individual, Nationalism, Liberty, and perhaps Feminism. In fact, in a couple of ways which I can look at only briefly, one could claim that silence actually occupied the central position, either as Ideal referent or as ground, of much that we consider Romanticism today.

Why should I talk about Romanticism in this context? My justification is that a great deal of what we think of as modern thought assumed its familiar shape during the Romantic period, exerting a formative but sometimes underestimated influence over the establishment of Modernism and whatever has come since. Also, assuming intellectual force in the United States only after Romanticism's decline in Britain in the 1830s, an American Romanticism, in the guise of Transcendentalism, extended well into the second half of the nineteenth century. It is worth pondering on the thought that, when that pre-eminent exemplar of American Romanticism, the poet Walt Whitman, died in 1892, the Modernist poets W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot had all been born. Students of the literature of England have tended to overlook the significance of this point. This trans-Atlantic continuity of a Romanticism, which had assimilated certain Puritan and Enlightenment values along the way, also explains a great deal about the current uses and abuses of American political rhetoric: whether it be the rhetoric of the Cold War, the Gulf War or the recent Presidential campaign. But that is another subject which, like so many others, is outside the scope of this lecture. Nonetheless I hope that what I have said indicates the significance of Romanticism for the discursive, cultural and political exigencies of the last decade of the twentieth century and beyond. It might therefore be both instructive and useful to see what the Romantics meant by silence, that is, to see how silence is constructed within Romantic discourse. In doing this, we can see the value or values the Romantics ascribed to silence.

\* \* \*

We could do no better, since I am talking about the English Romantic poets here, than to start with Wordsworth. I am sure that everyone here knows his famous sonnet known as "Upon Westminster Bridge" (which is not, incidentally, its true title). Wordsworth's sonnet is an extraordinary celebration of the city of London, a city which William Blake had damned so resoundingly in his poem, "London", only eight years before. Perhaps, in fact, we should look at Blake's poem first. Blake's "London" is one in which anguished noise predominates: the speaker "marks" "every cry of every man", "every Infant's cry of fear", "the Chimney-sweeper's cry" and "the hapless Soldier's cry". And the last stanza of Blake's poem reads:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear,  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

(16-20)

The youthful Harlot's curse may well be venereal disease, but it is also malediction which can be heard, as can the other noises, the cries of anguish and outrage, in the poem.

In contrast to Blake's "London", Wordsworth's London early in the morning of September 3, 1802, is silent. Quite explicitly, the poem states that:

This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

(4-8)

It is a poem shot through with contradictions. You have probably already noticed how the city is bare, yet wearing "the beauty of the morning" like a garment, the garment of nakedness. And the beauty of London is celebrated at the moment in which its "mighty heart is lying still", as though it were some wondrous corpse. The point of the poem, as I read it, is that at this moment early on a warm autumn morning the city has died as a city, to become transfigured as Nature. Just as Wordsworth's river, which



“glideth at his own sweet will” contrasts with Blake’s “charter’d Thames”, so too does the silence of Wordsworth’s London contrast with the noise of Blake’s. In Wordsworth’s sonnet, silence is the figure of the transfiguration of the human to the natural, of the social to the spiritual, of the historical to the eternal, of the contingent to the true. Truth, in other words, speaks by means of silence. Or to put that the other way round, silence is truth uttering itself.

Another poem by Wordsworth, “Resolution and Independence”, marks a similar congruence of truth and silence. The poem’s narrator encounters an old man gathering leeches for sale to doctors in a remote part of the country. He is described as being like a stone, and when the narrator quizzes him about his life and livelihood, he answers so quietly that the narrator has to ask him again: “The old Man still stood talking by my side; / But now his voice to me was like a stream / Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide” (106-108). The poem ends with the narrator envisioning the old man “Wandering about alone and silently” (131). Yet the old man’s silence has uttered the precepts of the poem’s title, which are not actually articulated in words spoken in the poem itself, that is, resolution and independence. Again silence is valorised as that which transcends the contingent.

There is a long tradition which identifies silence with the utterance of truth. It stretches back to the ancient Mysteries and finds expression in the notion of the Ineffable: that truth which cannot take the form of words. That truth has been represented graphically as the intersection of lines at the centre of the Mandala, the unseen centre from which the lines also radiate. It is represented by the light which illuminates, but not to the eye, of Medieval mystics and of the conclusion of Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*. In Australia, it is actually invoked in a poem by John Shaw Neilson titled “The Orange Tree”. Neilson’s poem was written early this century. In it, a man persistently questions a young girl who seems preoccupied with something else. The man tries, by a series of increasingly intrusive questions, to descry what the girl is thinking about. The poem ends in this way:

Is it a fluttering heart that gave  
Too willingly and was reviled?

he asks.

Is it the stammering at a grave,  
The last word of a little child?

– Silence! the young girl said. Oh, why,  
Why will you talk to weary me?  
Plague me no longer now, for I  
Am listening like the Orange Tree.

(33-40)

But in Australian writing, probably the most explicit celebration of silence as truth speaking is found in David Malouf’s wonderful novel, *An Imaginary Life*.

*An Imaginary Life* is the fictionalised account of the Latin poet Ovid’s exile in Pontus on the Black Sea, close to present-day Constanza in Romania. Exiled from Rome and its Sydney-like sophistication and intrigue—exiled too from the Latin language upon which, as a poet, his reputation was built—Ovid climbs down, you could say, the linguistic ladder. He learns the basic, earthy language of the people among whom he has been exiled. But below that is another rung, another language. As age advances upon him and Rome’s labyrinthine and power-riddled distinctions become a fading memory, Ovid yearns towards a language which is not a language, but “a language beyond tongues” (63). Like the language of Wordsworth’s leech gatherer, which “was like a stream / Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide”, Ovid approaches and enters into a language which does not “define and divide” (98) as Latin, or any other spoken or written language, does. Guided by a Wild Child who has been brought up by animals and who has never learned human speech, Ovid sets out on a journey towards a death which is a reunion with the pre-verbal state of infancy and an affirmation of wholeness. As Ovid says in Malouf’s novel, “The true language, I know now, is that speech in silence in which we first communicated, the Child and I” (97). It may be worth recalling, at this point, that the Latin etymology of infant means “unable to speak”: the infant is the Child who has not yet “fallen” into the world of language.

*An Imaginary Life* was published in 1978, and bears eloquent testimony to the vitality of the tradition which equates truth with silence, while testifying to the fact that, if silence were left to itself, nobody would ever hear it. This tradition expresses a form of Idealism which Christianity and its notion of the

Fall perpetuated, but which can be traced back to Plato. Jacques Derrida (1981a) does just that in his essay, "Plato's Pharmacy", which examines Plato's famous parable, in the *Phaedrus*, of the privileging of the spoken over the written word. Translating Plato's hierarchy—rather brutally and over-simply, I must confess—into the terms of the linguistic ladder I erected within Malouf's novel, Latin is the written word, the language of political power and manipulation. It is a language which divides: and its combination of power and divisiveness spells out Ovid's sentence: exile. The language of the tribe Ovid is exiled among has no written form, and is the spoken word, the language of work, the land, the family, community: that which belongs together. And the unspoken language, "that speech in silence", is Truth itself.

\* \* \*

At this point it might be tempting to ask just why silence and truth have been equated in this way, especially in the light of recent analyses of the relation of discourse to power. The answers to this question are numerous and various. Derrida (1981b) would suggest that silence signifies what speech cannot accomplish, that is, a fullness or plenitude of presence, what is felt as Truth. Derrida argues that this presence is always not quite within our grasp, and our sense of it, to use Emmanuel Kant's term, is a "transcendental illusion" (33), a "lure" (22).

Feminist and Marxist theoreticians have analysed the power of language, and the way that the control of a discourse extends to the exercise of political power. They have also, of course, demonstrated how discourse can be controlled. But while Marxists say little—remain quiet, you might say—about silence, there is a branch of Feminist thought which sees in silence a non-lexical, pre-Oedipal figuration, what Julia Kristeva (1974) calls the Semiotic, which predates and evades the strictures of patriarchal discourse. Psychoanalytically, silence utters that sense of undividedness that David Malouf's Ovid yearns toward, that is, of being undivided within oneself, and undivided from what surrounds one. This is what the infant experiences, before its growing maturation and the Oedipal drama compel it to have recourse to the mediation of language to negotiate the growing gap between itself and its world. But the adult does not totally lose that sense of undividedness, and hankers back to it, as Ovid does. Or as does the speaker in the poem, "The Other Half", by the Australian poet Judith Wright. Addressing her "other half", she acknowledges that:

Yet there's a word that I would give to you:  
the truth you tell in your dumb images  
my daylight self goes stumbling after too.  
So we may meet at last, and meeting bless,  
and turn into one truth in singleness.

(11-15)

The word is subsumed into a silence which is Truth itself.

My question was: why has silence been equated with truth? Why has there been such a long tradition—at least two and a half thousand years of logocentrism, according to Derrida—which privileges silence as a truth which speech can only approach?

The answer, I think, is embarrassingly simple. Speech is not good enough. I do not mean that our linguistic competence is not adequate to the tasks that confront it, although of course all of us know moments when it is not. That is not the point. The point is—as Lacan (1977) argued—that language is the index of the divided subject: that is, the subject which is divided from the world about it, as well as divided internally: as, for example, consciousness is divided from the unconscious, or as the subject thinking about itself is divided from the "self" the subject is thinking about. So long as language is the condition of that "fall"—and it always must be—an Edenic silence lures us back to the pre-verbal infant state and its blissful unawareness of the human condition.

\* \* \*

I said earlier that one could claim that silence actually occupied the central position of much that we consider Romanticism today in a couple of ways. We have looked at one of them, that is, at how a Romantic identification of silence with truth remains a powerful trope in contemporary writing. In that tradition, silence and language are opposites: silence utters what speech cannot. But there is another way in which the Romantics figured silence, and that is not as truth itself, but as a ground for the production of speech. In this tradition, speech utters what silence cannot, and they are necessary partners.

Again, this sense that silence is productive does not start with the Romantics. I can recall, again from my schooldays, the passage in Book II of Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the Greeks have pretended to abandon their attempts to capture Troy, and have sailed off, leaving their Wooden Horse behind them. Later that night, after the Trojans have fallen asleep, exhausted by their celebrations, the Greeks row stealthily back "per amica silentia lunae" (II.255): through the friendly (or complicit) silence of the moon. And one can never forget Cordelia's courageous and stubborn silence in Act I of *King Lear*, and Lear's angry response, "Nothing will come of nothing" (I.i.90). Like the Trojans celebrating the retreat of the Greeks, Lear, of course, was disastrously wrong. In both *The Aeneid* and *King Lear*, silence produces what turns out to look remarkably like destiny.

For an equally stern, but much more positive, account of the productivity of silence, we can go again to Wordsworth. (It is as though Wordsworth were anticipating his American admirer, Walt Whitman, who proclaimed cheerfully, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / [I am vast. I contain multitudes]") ("Song of Myself", 1324-6). Book I of Wordsworth's long poem, *The Prelude* (1799), describes his childhood and the stern moral lessons that Nature administered, teaching him, among other things, not to pinch other people's birds out of traps, nor to steal boats at night. The famous passage is far too long to quote by way of illustration, but behind these lessons is a silence, a silence which is Nature's. Nature's silence is not truth itself, but that which allows Nature to speak, and the child to listen.

Wordsworth wrote Book I of *The Prelude* in the same year as he wrote *Tintern Abbey*. In *Tintern Abbey*, he pays tribute to the morally and psychologically beneficial power—not so much of Nature itself, but of the ability to recall Nature, to recollect Nature in Nature's absence, that is, "in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities" (24-25). The silence of recollection contrasts with the surrounding "din", and is the basis for a remarkable claim. The "beauteous forms" of the Wye River, dwelling now in the silence of the recollecting mind, are able, so the poem tells us, to induce

that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened.

(37-41)

In this blessed mood of silence, the poem continues:

we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul;  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.

(45-49)

I am labouring to divide here what Wordsworth somewhat fruitfully confuses. My purpose is to indicate that in this passage silence is not truth itself, but the condition under which truth, "the life of things", is manifest. Perhaps a clearer example would be that passage in Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" where, unable to die, the Mariner watches the water snakes cavorting, as water snakes tend to do, in the shadow of a ship where all but one of the crew is dead:

Within the shadow of the ship  
I watched their rich attire:  
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled and swam; and every track  
Was a flash of golden fire.  
  
O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea.

(277-291)

There goes, Wordsworth might say, the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world! My point here, though, is that the dreadful silence the Mariner had to endure in the face of his dead comrades gives way to a silence in which “no tongue” becomes capable of declaring the beauty of nature. This silence leads to involuntary adoration (“I blessed them unaware”) and then to speech (“I could pray”). The Mariner’s ability to pray eventually leads him to a street in England where he “stoppeth one of three” and tells his story. Silence is not the end of speech, the Beyond of speech, as in that other Romantic figuration of it, but that out of which speech—and further speech—proceeds.

Perhaps the clearest Romantic declaration of this is the opening of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. The urn is addressed as

Thou still unravished bride of quietness  
Thou foster child of silence and slow time...

The Urn itself speaks in the present tense of visual representation: it will give no answer to the questions addressed to it concerning the past, such as “What little town...is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?” But the Urn’s very taciturnity produces speech, which is the Ode itself, an enigmatic meditation on truth.

Let me jump now 120 years to 1939, on the verge of the outbreak of war. And let’s listen to a poem by W. B. Yeats, this one, like “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”, written in the year of his death. It is called “Long-Legged Fly”, and I would like to read it to you in full.

That civilization may not sink,  
Its great battle lost,  
Quiet the dog, tether the pony  
To a distant post;  
Our master Caesar is in the tent  
Where the maps are spread,  
His eyes fixed upon nothing,  
A hand under his head.  
*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream*  
*His mind moves upon silence.*

That the topless towers be burnt  
And men recall that face,  
Move most gently if move you must  
In this lonely place.  
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,  
That nobody looks; her feet  
Practise a tinker shuffle  
Picked up on a street.  
*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream*  
*Her mind moves upon silence.*

That girls at puberty may find  
The first Adam in their thought,  
Shut the door of the Pope’s chapel,  
Keep those children out.  
There on that scaffolding reclines  
Michael Angelo.  
With no more sound than the mice make  
His hand moves to and fro.  
*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream*  
*His mind moves upon silence.*

Civilisation, courage, beauty, innocence, sexuality, culture, art: according to Yeats's poem, they are all produced out of silence. They are all sustained by silence.

What happens if silence disappears?

\* \* \*

I have mentioned already the tractor that replaced Hardy's "Old horse that stumbles and nods". Hardy himself wrote memorably, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1958: 168) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1965: 365-376), of the mechanisation of rural life. D. H. Lawrence (1958: 11-13) starts his novel, *The Rainbow*, with a description of how the advent of a canal, a colliery and a railway marks the beginning of ever-accelerating change. In 1964 the American critic, Leo Marx, published a significant study along similar lines. The book was called *The Machine in the Garden*. You might think that Marx was referring to the lawn mower, and in one way you would not be wrong. But the machine actually referred to is the railroad, which in the nineteenth century began to intrude upon what had been represented as a Garden of Eden. The machine begins to look something like a mechanical serpent.

But it is not the replacement of the silent horse by the noisy tractor or train that I find disturbing. I am far from being a Luddite, and welcome technology when it is productive. Countless millions of people have been saved from starvation by mechanisation and modern engineering. What I find disturbing is the *unproductive* intrusion of noise upon both silence *and* speech. And I find this particularly alarming because not only is it so easily achieved, but it appears to be bringing about a reversal of values which have potentially disastrous consequences.

What do I mean by the unproductive intrusion of noise upon silence? I mean, for example, the incessant strains of music from cheap radios and cassette players that fill the days and nights of the world from Subiaco to Broome, from Perth to Cairns, from Australia to Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. With today's cheaply available technology, one need never listen to silence.

I mean the hand-held cellular telephones that people with little imagination or sense of occasion like to put between them and their partner on the restaurant table as they go out to dinner together. That telephone contains an urgent message, which bleats repeatedly: I MIGHT BE NEEDED, THEREFORE I AM.

I mean the unnecessary intrusion upon the silent parts of Australia's Outback—its deserts, its ranges of hills and mountains, its coastlines, its far too small National Parks. In the USA vast areas are off-limits to any form of mechanised transport. By contrast, virtually all of Australia is freely open to off-road vehicles so that we can drive where the original inhabitants walked.

I mean, in other words, the growth of a culture that does not prize separateness, aloneness, isolation and even loneliness as a part of the human condition, as the other and necessary side of community. I mean a culture that considers silence to be a sign of failure, rather than a resource. I mean a culture that does not understand that its great achievements, as Yeats's poem tells us, are the movements of the mind "upon silence".

Powerboats, portable telephones, unregulated off-road vehicles, ghetto-blasters, Walkmen and other intrusive technological innovations: they may seem irritating but trivial by-products of a technology that has brought untold benefits to the world. (Though the same technology, one should remember, has also brought us nuclear weapons, "smart bombs" and high-speed, pollution-free money laundering.) I would contend, though, that these apparently trivial consumer products, by virtue of their cheapness and consequent ubiquity, are not only a symptom of the change in social values I am sketching here, but also a cause.

Because we *can* always be in touch now, we are losing the art of switching off, of leaving the telephone and the radio and the portable CD player at home, of carrying our provisions in a backpack instead of in the back of the Toyota, and of being, for a while, voluntarily and gladly out of touch, out of reach. It is not technology that I deplore, but an attitude that technology has made possible.

Why should this be so important? Let us consider the first conception of silence that I sketched here: silence as the utterance of truth. The death of this silence can be seen as the death of an idealism and a death of its consequent humility. One can put that another way and say that if silence is no longer regarded as the utterance of truth—even if this is a delusion, which I believe it is—then this is not the result of any great advance in the capacity of human speech. (In fact, so long as we allow technology to speak instead of us, it is more than likely that our capacity to be articulate will diminish.) Rather, it is an indication of a diminished conception of what truth might be, and a complacency with the

inadequacies of our expressive capabilities. A dimension of excellence will have vanished from our spectrum of values.

The other conception of silence I sketched was silence as that which is productive of thought. This conception of silence likens it to the unconscious, as that which comprises a large and vital part of our subjectivity yet which can become conscious only by transgressing its condition of being not conscious, not spoken. Silence, seen this way, is that mute past out of which our thoughts—which are inevitably in some kind of language—emerge and are thus able to constitute our conscious self—both as individuals and as a culture. Silence is the total of the non-spoken or the unspeakable, the ground of thought and speech, upon which thought moves like Yeats's long-legged fly. This silence can therefore be regarded, in a Saussurean or Lacanian sense, as the Other, as that which speech is not, and against which speech, by its very difference, has to be constituted. When considered in this light, silence and speech, far from being antagonists, are the two necessary components of the duality which enables us to distinguish—to use the phrase of the American poet Emily Dickinson—"syllable from sound" (632: 12).

The opposite of silence conceived/constructed in this way is not speech, but noise, which is the opposite of both. What we are witnessing today, I believe, is the relentless encroachment, upon all aspects of our mental and intellectual life, of noise. Think back for a moment to Yeats's poem. Can you imagine Caesar plotting his campaign with the telephones ringing and the computers chattering? Can you imagine Helen of Troy practising her "tinker shuffle" while listening to her ghetto-blaster? Or can you imagine Michelangelo painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with the radio blaring beside him? If the truth be told, you probably can. But can you imagine Yeats, fifty years ago, or *anyone* in the whole history of humanity before perhaps the late 1950s, imagining it? Can you? Yet this is what we have today: the voluntary—and I want to stress that it is voluntary, which is what so worries me—the voluntary replacement of silence by noise. As everyone here knows, who has tried to talk in a crowded restaurant, the result is a lack of contrast, of precision, of clarity. Like the discoloured varnish on old paintings, noise tends to cancel out differences. And it is only by difference, as Saussure pointed out, that language can operate at all. If that silence vanishes, then a crucial degree of thoughtfulness will go with it.

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What can we, in Australian universities, and in Edith Cowan University in particular, do about this? I have no remedy: our culture is changing and nothing we do will stop it. But we can make ourselves, and our students, aware of the change, and of its nature. We can point to the value placed upon silence in the history of our culture—a value which is even greater within traditional Aboriginal culture. We can demonstrate how values central to our own world—Liberty, Imagination, a sense of community and a sense of individual dignity regardless of race and gender—received the shape and quality they still largely have because they were given them by people for whom silence was of importance. And we can point out that if silence disappears these values will either disappear too, or assume a different, and perhaps a lesser, form.

The English Department at Edith Cowan University has good neighbours. We are part of the School of Language, Literature and Media Studies. (And *its* neighbours are the departments which comprise the School of Social and Cultural Studies—equally good neighbours.) Language Studies, which includes Applied Linguistics as well as the teaching of languages, and Media Studies are valuable allies indeed, because we all focus on language which, as I hope I have made clear in my talk this afternoon, can be a synonym for knowledge. Whether it be with regard to the spoken or written word, or to the multiple languages of image, music and speech employed by the non-print media, our knowledges complement each other. I hope that close cooperation among the three departments, and the two schools, will provide our students with an understanding of silence as I have discussed it here. If we can achieve this, we will be furnishing them with a means of enlarging, as well as of analysing and understanding, the world they will confront long after we have shuffled. In particular, I hope that collaboration by our departments will assist the identification and the bringing into speech of those who, because of gender, race, class or colonial subordination, have been silenced by dominant cultural forces. And I hope that collaboration will bring about new and exciting collaborative research to these ends.

This mention of research brings me almost inevitably to a recurrent theme among researchers in the Humanities today. If I repeat it with a kind of weariness, it is not because I do not passionately believe in it, but because I wonder whether anyone is listening. A recent memo from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) stated quite accurately (and I quote):

The total of ARC (Australian Research Council) large grants awarded is the index used by the ARC in making allocations of other research monies to universities. That is, large ARC grants have a multiplier effect in that additional research monies from other ARC funds are automatically allocated to the university...

It is not recorded whether Caesar, Helen of Troy or Michelangelo ever received a “large” research grant. I suspect they did not. Nor did Plato, nor Wordsworth, nor Blake, nor Keats, nor Yeats. What they did receive was time to think and to write—inadequate as that often was. In other words, in certain areas of the Humanities—though not all, and certainly not in most other disciplines—the whole concept of a large research grant is not only irrelevant but ludicrous. In the Humanities, much research of value can be achieved without any research grant whatever, provided the university can provide the researcher some regular time and freedom from the babble of committees and the legitimate demands of students. In other words, the university must provide the researcher with a modicum of silence. This means rethinking research funding in the Humanities. It means lightening teaching loads, or at least rationalising them in areas where research grants are inappropriate; and it means providing periods of leave for intensive and sustained research. The cost to the university is small, the benefit to everyone enormous. The difficult task, of course, is to convince the ARC and the universities that excellence in research in the Humanities need not be measured by the financial cost of its achievement, but can be achieved as a result of the interaction of teaching and thinking. If this can be done, there will be less need for research grants in some areas of the Humanities, and research opportunities will be open to everyone who teaches, and not just to the lucky few who get grants.

Let me end on a more personal note. In addition to being an academic, I write poetry. Numerous people have tried to define poetry, and none has done it successfully. But one thing distinguishes (most) poetry from prose, and that is the fact that the lines of poetry do not go all the way to the right hand margin. The result, when one reads poetry, is a momentary pause in the linguistic current, a recurring fraction of silence, before utterance begins again. This does not happen in prose, which has very little silence built into it. Whatever else poetry may be, it is speech and silence walking together, silence walking publicly and proudly with its voluble partner. Given what I have said about silence today, I hope you will appreciate therefore my hope that, when our students finish their study at Edith Cowan University, their attitude to the world will not be prosaic.

We must acknowledge that our students will go into a world where silence can be avoided, and that it will be avoided by most people. But if we can teach our students the function, and therefore the value, of silence, I believe we will be teaching them much about the nature of knowledge. We will, quite simply, be teaching them to be thoughtful: and, in the next century, they may very well need to be just that.

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